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ABSTRACT

A public policy seminar discussed how to match small towns and small computers. James K. Coyne, Special Assistant to the President and Director of the White House Office of Private Sector Initiatives, offered opening remarks and described a database system developed by his office to link organizations and communities with small computers to information in the memory of mainframe computers. Betsy Sherman, Director of the International City Management Association's Management Information Service, presented the results of a survey her organization conducted, showing how small communities have already embraced small computers. J.M. Whitmer, cooperative extension specialist for the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development (Iowa State University) described the systems and programs his office has developed for local leaders and highlighted the successes Iowa towns have had with computerization. Andy Arizala, President of Arizala Corporation, discussed progress in software development for townships and offered tips on selecting programs and systems. Dr. Thomas J. Bergin, speculator of the group and Director of the Quantitative Teaching and Research Laboratory (The American University, Washington, D.C.) offered ideas on future technological developments and shared his thoughts on possible use of video disks by small, local governments. A glossary of computer terms and names and addresses of 44 seminar participants are provided. (Author/MH)

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SMALL TOWNS AND SMALL COMPUTERS: CAN A MATCH BE MADE?

A Public Policy Seminar

June 22, 1983

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SMALL TOWNS AND SMALL COMPUTERS:
CAN A MATCH BE MADE?

INTRODUCTION

Towns and townships are just beginning to discover the advantages -- and problems -- of computerization. Ten years ago, a match between small towns and computers (there were no "small" computers then) was impossible. The price tag on a computer was beyond the reach of most town board budgets and the operation of a computer was more than most local government officials could handle.

Today a match is not only possible, it's advisable for many small communities. The costs have plunged and, because the technology has advanced, microcomputers can be operated by anyone. Small towns and townships are writing success stories of how a $3,000 investment saved the clerk's time and increased revenues for the locality.

But there is still a long way to go. The communities that pioneered the use of small computers have had problems getting good, practical advice about equipment purchases. A program written to calculate a household budget won't bill citizens for water services, so local officials had to find people to write special programs.

NATaT heard the success stories, listened to the frustration, then organized a public policy seminar to discuss "Small Towns and Small Computers: Can a Match be Made?"

James K. Coyne, special assistant to the president and director of the White House Office of Private Sector Initiatives, offered opening remarks at the seminar. He told about a database system his office is developing and what the system will offer local officials.

"The Latest News on Small Town Governments and Microcomputer Utilization" was given by Betsy Sherman, director of the Management Information Service of the International City Management Association. Sherman presented the

results of a survey her association conducted which showed how small communities have already embraced small computers.

J.M. (Jack) Whitmer, cooperative extension specialist for the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development at Iowa State University, described "High Tech in Small Town Iowa." Whitmer told about the systems and programs his office has worked on for local leaders, and he highlighted the successes Iowa towns have had with computerization.

Andy Arizala, president of Arizala Corporation, discussed "Progress in Software Development for Townships" and offered tips on selecting systems and programs.

The speculator of the group was Dr. Thomas J. Bergin, director of the Quantitative Teaching and Research Laboratory at The American University, in Washington D.C. Bergin offered ideas of "Where We're Traveling Along the High Tech Highway" and shared his thoughts on another new technology for small, local governments: video disks.

"Small Towns and Small Computers: Can a Match be Made?" was the third in a series of public policy seminars NATaT sponsored in 1983. An April program looked at "Financing Economic Development: What Will Work in Rural America?" and a May seminar asked, "Transportation Deregulation: Barrier or Gateway to Small Town Development?". Reports on each of these seminars are available; an order form is included at the end of this report.

Together, the seminars and reports are designed to encourage interest in the economic development of our nation's small communities. The series is supported by the U.S. Economic Development Administration.

Barton D. Russell
Executive Director
National Association of
Towns and Townships

July 1983

Nancy T. Stark, Seminar Series Coordinator
Jeffrey H. Schiff, Director of Special Programs
Rosalyn Voige, Author of Reports
Bruce G. Rosenthal, Director of Communications

A GLOSSARY OF COMPUTER TERMS USED IN THIS REPORT

Bit (Binary Digit): The smallest unit of information recognized by a computer. Bits are usually grouped in nybbles, bytes or words. A vendor might describe a machine as an 8-bit computer; a programmer would need to know that information.

Byte: A string of bits, usually eight, operated upon as a unit and usually shorter than a word. Most microcomputers use 8-bit, or one byte, words. A vendor will describe the capacity of a disk or a disk drive in thousands of bytes.

Database: All the information that exists at any time. A town's database might be citizen addresses, the utility rate, meter readings, personnel records and election records.

Hardware: The nuts, bolts, boards, chips, wires, transformers, circuits, etc., of a computer and the components in its system. A community interested in purchasing a computer might look at the following hardware: keyboard, monitor or CRT, disk drive, printer and modem.

Modem (Modulator-Demodulator): A device that lets computers talk to each other over a telephone line. A township might want to have a modem so the trustee can instantly find out what legislation is being considered in the state capital or in Washington.

Software: The collection of programs, routines and documents associated with a computer. A town or township might be interested in software that will do utility billing, general accounting, word processing, inventory control, fleet maintenance or mailing lists.

SMALL TOWNS AND SMALL COMPUTERS:
CAN A MATCH BE MADE?

Computer seminars ten years ago had little show, mostly tell. When NATaT held "Small Towns and Small Computers: Can a Match be Made?" in June 1983, the speakers came with computers in hand. The technological advances that have reduced high-powered machines from ones that occupied an entire room to ones that fit in a hip pocket are the changes that have made computers available to small communities.

James K. Coyne was one of the first Congressional representatives to use a microcomputer to communicate with his constituents. When he left Congress, he took his knowledge of and enthusiasm for computers to the White House Office of Private Sector Initiatives. There he launched a special computer project of which he hopes local governments will take full advantage; Coyne told about his project in his opening remarks at the computer seminar.

"Computers and telecommunications advances are some of the best tools a town or township official has today," Coyne said. He pointed out the broad field of information that can be computerized in the town hall: "real estate tax rolls, maintenance records for snowplows, personnel records for police and fire departments, virtually everything that involves information."

Coyne told about his introduction to computers. "In 1971 Coyne Chemical bought a mainframe, 32,000-byte computer for tens of thousands of dollars. You can now buy that much of a computer for $800; the price curve is mind boggling."

This reduction in cost without loss of power is what inspired Coyne to establish DATA/NET, a computer database that can be used by organizations

and communities; it was designed and is run by a private, non-profit organization. DATA/NET allows owners of small computers to retrieve and store information that is in the memory of mainframe computers or to communicate with other owners through electronic mail. This is all done through the computer's modem.

"A DATA/NET subscriber," Coyne explained, "could read the NATaT database. Let's say I'm a township supervisor and I want to know if NATaT has information on Iowa, my hometown, or garbage collection in small communities. I'd be able to find out through DATA/NET, and all I'd need is a telephone hook-up (on my computer). With NATaT and towns and townships on the system, DATA/NET users can communicate with each other for a few hundred dollars."

Several organizations and government agencies have joined DATA/NET. A subscriber today could get information from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agline, Dow Jones, the Wall Street Journal, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce or the Associated Press. It costs the user money to access some of these sources but others, like Agline, are free. Congress and the White House are being hooked into DATA/NET, according to Coyne.

"Lots of people think small towns and small organizations are behind big corporations in computerization," Coyne said. "But the federal government is far behind small, local governments. The disability system is maintained on a 1935 system.

"There are 19,000 different computer systems in the federal government; less than 100 can communicate with each other. I hope local government leaders do not feel threatened (about using a computer) in any way; it is no more threatening than using a telephone." Coyne acknowledged that adults often resist typing on a keyboard but gave an example of how that resistance can be overridden: "I took (the computer he brought with him to the seminar) in to President Reagan. He doesn't type but he showed an aggressive curiosity about the machine."

On the purchase of computers for local governments, Coyne advised, "The right time is now for towns and townships to computerize. Local officials can't wait until the market hits bottom because it never will hit. Community leaders have to ask 'Are we ready to move now'. It is important to assess one's own skills and talents before going out and buying a computer.

"Think through the reasons for wanting a system. Towns and townships will find software much more expensive -- and much harder to locate -- than hardware."

WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS: THE LATEST NEWS ON SMALL TOWN GOVERNMENTS AND MICROCOMPUTER UTILIZATION

Betsy Sherman directs the Management Information Service of the International City Management Association (ICMA). Her presentation at the small towns and small computers seminar revealed the results of a recent survey conducted by the association "ICMA members are intrigued by microcomputers but are not sure what to do with them," she began. "There is tremendous interest, a lot going on, but still, needs that have to be filled."

Sherman quickly summarized the uses of microcomputers and results of computerization in municipalities that were given in the survey. "Micros have been able to automate functions previously done by service bureaus or (information filed) in cigar boxes. They have allowed productivity gains and in-depth analysis."

The ICMA survey had 2,433 responses: approximately one in two responses was from a locality of less than 10,000 population. Computers are

"in" in local governments, according to this survey: 13 percent of the respondents have a microcomputer, and 35 percent plan to buy one within the next two years. Computerization expectations were met or exceeded by two-thirds of the owner respondents. Although most microcomputers in government are used by themselves, "10 percent were connected to a database," explained Sherman.

The director presented some other interesting facts the survey pointed out. "The primary problems that respondents listed were staff training, the unavailability of software, and underutilization of computer capacity." The three most-used microcomputers, the survey found, are Apple, IBM and Radio Shack; operators are usually technicians or secretaries.

Sherman said the challenge to organizations, like ICMA, that are helping local governments computerize is "to make people understand how to use computers. There is too much information available with (computers). We need to help people weed through it."

"HIGH TECH" IN SMALL TOWN IOWA: FOUR YEARS' EXPERIENCE IN DESIGNING LOW-COST, COOPERATIVE AGREEMENTS

J.M. (Jack) Whitmer is working through Iowa State University and the Cooperative Extension Service to "bring new technology to the local government official. We're looking at the mid-level people," he said, "We have to help them now."

Whitmer, an ex-city manager and political scientist for cooperative extension, related to the seminar audience what local officials have said

to him: "There isn't good, off-the-shelf software available to local governments. And if it was available, we wouldn't be able to use it." This message encouraged Whitmer to get Iowa's regional extension offices together to find a way to make hardware and software user friendly for the local government official.

"We asked local officials where they spend their time. We found out town clerks' time that was spent to do quarterly billings for sewer, water, disposal service, etc., tripled when they began billing monthly," Whitmer said. So the extension service got a programmable calculator, programmed it to do town service billings and taught officials how to use it. "In Monticello (Iowa), we cut the time it takes to do billing from five days to one day. In Fayette (Iowa), it used to be nine days from when the meter was read to when money came in. It's now down to four days."

The utility billing system has passed the users' test; it is being used in about 40 small Iowa communities. Whitmer projected that a similar system on a hand-held computer, would be "up and running by fall. It can eliminate errors in billing and will be on a system that costs less than $2,000; the software will be free."

The Iowa Cooperative Extension Service has experimented beyond computerized billing for local governments. Whitmer and other extension specialists found that towns were not investing idle public funds to get as much return from them as they could. "Local governments had money in checking accounts; officials needed a simulation to show them the possibilities of increased revenues" through careful investment.

When the microcomputer simulation program was written, the extension service demonstrated it for a county treasurer. "The county had $8 million in its checking account for 15 days. The investment simulation showed that the interest this idle money could generate would be equal to two times the treasurer's salary. The treasurer was intrigued," related Whitmer.

Extension is also testing a computerized geomap system for better emergency response. "The program gets the name, address, phone number and pertinent data -- if the person is elderly, if the home is near a water supply -- to the driver (of an ambulance or fire truck) within 15 seconds of the call.

"To introduce technology at this level," Whitmer admitted, "we had to have willing, innovative local government officials, technology through the extension service and funding support."

GOOD NEWS AND BAD NEWS: PROGRESS IN SOFTWARE FOR TOWNSHIPS; PROBLEMS WHEN THE PART-TIME CLERK MEETS THE HUNGRY VENDOR

Andy Arizala is the president of Arizala Corporation, an Ann Arbor, Mich., firm specializing in developing software for local governments. He spoke from experience with communities of 5,000 to 10,000 in population when he said, "The part-time clerk has a difficult time dealing with computer vendors because of intimidation and the jargon used.

"When buying hardware," Arizala confided, "it's hard to believe the vendor who offers a toy to solve all of a township's problems. The two most common mistakes made when buying hardware is buying too small a memory or buying too small a disk storage."

As far as choosing the amount of memory that's needed, Arizala advises, "the larger the better because the more sophisticated the program, the more sophisticated the operating system. To calculate the size of memory you need, (Arizala Corporation) has a worksheet available." The worksheet takes into consideration the number of general ledger accounts, the number

of accounts payable or purchase orders used each year, and the total accounts receivable every year. Write to Arizala Corporation for a copy of this at 210 Collingwood Avenue, Ann Arbor, MI 48103.

The Arizala Corporation also has an 18-point checklist designed for prospective computer owners. "Our checklist is user friendly," he said. "If the reader digests half of it, he or she wouldn't be intimidated" by vendors or their jargon.

"One of the main problems (Arizala sees in his consulting services) is that prospective clients don't know what they want. People buy a computer first and then worry about the software they can't find. Vendors have to know what buyers want and what their expectations from a system are."

Arizala and his company's checklist caution against buying obsolete equipment. "As far as a township is concerned, equipment is obsolete if it doesn't meet the government's needs." Similarly, buyers should beware of very new equipment.

The computer consultant concluded by admonishing the audience to make sure "the purchase or lease contract is user friendly."

CRYSTAL BALL PROPHECIES:
WHERE WE'RE TRAVELING ALONG THE "HIGH TECH" HIGHWAY

"There is a difference between the computer one might play with or learn on and the system a town or township can use in payrolls, billings, etc.," began Dr. Thomas J. Bergin, director of the Quantitative Teaching and Research Laboratory of The American University.

Bergin sees more changes forthcoming in technology than in costs. "The cost of a business machine is not going to come down," he thinks.

"It's about going to bottom out where it is now. It's going to cost $3,000 to $5,000 for an initial system.

"Waiting will get you more capacity. The density of the (silicon) chip is going to change and there will be much more user friendly software in three to five years," he predicted.

Bergin looks at "high tech" problems for small towns differently than the other speakers did. "The problem is information storage, not programs for payroll, tax records or school records."

Bergin also looks at a different solution: "Help is on the way through compact video disks." He held up a four-inch, shiny disk and said, "This holds two billion bits of information. That's a couple of encyclopedias, the Bible and the complete works of Shakespeare. Video disks will be taken out of stereo stores and be put into town halls to store (government) records."

A stereo record-size disk has 54,000 video frames on one side; it holds the same amount of information as 5,000 to 10,000 floppy disks. Bergin thinks video disk technology will peak when a single disk can store all of a town's records.

He described how a technologically aware public is developing. "Kids are learning (about computers) in schools, doing phenomenal things with reading; banks and courts use computers; state and federal governments use computers now; farmers use computers; towns will be totally surrounded by technology. Local officials will have to use computers."

Bergin suspects the day is coming when software will be tailored to towns and townships. "When the easy money dries up, when every block in this city has a computer store, someone is going to go out to less-densely populated areas."

The technology expert offered one warning to prospective buyers, "Have your eyes wide open. Remember, there is no such thing as a free lunch."

BETSY SHERMAN

Betsy Sherman is Director of Management Information Service (MIS) for International City Management Association (ICMA) in Washington, D.C. ICMA is the professional and educational organization for chief appointed management executives in local government.

MIS provides local government administrators with practical information on current programs in every area of municipal activity. As Director, Ms. Sherman is responsible for the overall management of MIS which includes identifying key issues, producing timely publications responding to such issues (such as Microcomputers: Tools for Local Government) and implementing a comprehensive promotion program.

Prior to coming to ICMA, Ms. Sherman coordinated field operations and issues development for Common Cause and taught French in the Montgomery County Public Schools, Maryland. She holds a B.A. in English from Vassar College and a Masters in American History and Government from Harvard University.

J. M. (JACK) WHITMER

Jack Whitmer has been actively involved in local government activities for almost twenty-five years -- almost ten years as a practitioner (professional city manager) and fifteen years in training local government officials. He has kept up to date in the specific areas of local government financial practices and labor relations.

While at Iowa State University, Mr. Whitmer has assisted the state in developing a program budgeting system for Iowa local governments, has assisted seventeen Iowa governments in converting their single entry case basis accounting and reporting system to a modified accrual system, and has trained numerous city, county, township and school officials in such areas as cash flow management and investment procedures, collective bargaining, home rule and other subjects. He initiated programs to introduce computer technology to small towns using programmable calculators for utility billing. He is presently developing a Computer Assisted Integrated Financial Management Information System (CAIFMIS) for local governments under 15,000 population.

Mr. Whitmer holds degrees in political science (University of Wisconsin-Madison), public administration (University of Iowa), economics (Iowa State University) and extension education (Iowa State University).

ANDY A. ARIZALA, II

Mr. Arizala is the President and founder of The Arizala Corporation, a management consulting and systems development company. Incorporated in 1973, the firm has had experience developing information systems for public and private organizations since 1969. Since mid-1975, the firm has specialized in developing applications software on the minicomputer and microcomputer for local governments. There are presently twenty-five (25) local governments using the Arizala Local Government Computer System.

Mr. Arizala has been the feature speaker of the Program Budgeting Seminar offered by the Division of Management Education, Graduate School of Business Administration, and has guest lectured in the Rackham School of Graduate Studies, Institute of Public Policy Studies, both of the University of Michigan. He has also designed and conducted similar seminars for Indiana University, the University of Tennessee, the FBI Academy, the United Presbyterian Church, the Michigan Municipal League, the Municipal Finance Officers Association, the Michigan Association of Governmental Computer Users Group, and for many local government units.

Mr. Arizala is co-author of "Team Management in Local Governments," an article appearing in Management Information Service, published by the International City Management Association in July, 1973. He holds a Bachelor of Science Degree in Engineering and a Master's in Business Administration, both from the University of Michigan.

THOMAS J. (TIM) BERGIN

Tim Bergin has been in the computer field since 1966. He started his Federal career as a systems analyst and management intern with the Veterans Administration. Since 1976, he has had numerous managerial assignments, including Director of the Data Administration and Privacy Staff, Associate Director of the Management and Planning Service, and Chief of the ACP Long Range Planning Division. Prior to leaving full-time government service in September 1982, he was Chief of the ADP Training Division.

Dr. Bergin holds a joint appointment at the American University: as Director of the Quantitative Teaching and Research laboratory, and as an Assistant Professor of Computer Systems Applications. In the former position, he is responsible for overseeing the functioning of a laboratory which provides direct support to graduate students, faculty, and staff on the use of the University's computing resources, research design, quantitative methods, and computer programming.

Dr. Bergin received his B.A. in English Literature from the University of Maryland. He has an M.A. in Technology of Management and a Ph.D. in Public Administration, both from American University. His dissertation was on the implementation of the Privacy Act by Federal agencies. He is presently co-authoring a book on using microcomputers in structural analysis for architects and engineers.

JAMES K. COYNE

James K. Coyne is Special Assistant to the President and Director of the White House Office of Private Sector Initiatives. The Office of Private Sector Initiatives was established by the President to encourage private initiative solutions to many of the social and economic problems of our nation's communities. Under the direction of Mr. Coyne, the Office works closely with business, religious, civic, union, neighborhood and government leaders in exploring ways to foster private initiatives and volunteerism.

Prior to accepting this appointment, Mr. Coyne served in the United States Congress, representing the 8th District of Pennsylvania, in 1980-82. He was President of the Coyne Chemical Company, Philadelphia, in 1971-80, and founded Energy Management Services, Inc., where he served as Chairman in 1977-78. Mr. Coyne served on the faculty of the Wharton Business School of the University of Pennsylvania in 1974-78.

Mr. Coyne was featured in a recent Washington Post Magazine article titled, "Why Congress Wants Computers." While in Congress, Mr. Coyne linked up with computer owners in his district and each day signed on to his terminal to read electronic letters from constituents. He is interested in encouraging local governments to benefit from computerization.

Mr. Coyne graduated from Yale University (B.S., 1968) and Harvard Business School (M.B.A., 1970). He is married and has three children. He was born November 17, 1945, in Farmville, Virginia.

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